

even if it takes forever by EmeraldTulip

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Summary:

So many of the papers in the folder are poems and stories and letters. Will finds his favorite—the ink slightly smudged by his fingers in the past, paper worn thin by the oils on his skin, folds and tears in the corners from how often he used to read it. Sometimes it strikes him that something so little could mean so much to him, but maybe that just means that it isn't so little after all.

“I love you, you know,” Will says, almost desperate because of the silence on the other end. “And you—well, ‘I love you more—’”

“—‘than I’ve ever loved anyone,’” Mike finishes, quietly, and Will can hear his smile.

(There are over 2,900 miles between them, but during their phone calls Will might as well be right there.)

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He doesn't mean to start looking through his folders, hasn't even decided if he wants to yet, but he finds himself thumbing through the papers anyway, sitting on his bed. He's always been messy in a neat way, if that makes sense—in his experience, that seems to be the case for most artists, anyway.

But he's careful with his art, and he doesn't mean to go through the one labeled *the best thing* in handwriting that isn't his, but that's the one he picks up first. Mike had scribbled the sentiment onto the cover in marker with a grin, not letting him see it before he could finish. Mike is a perfectionist, at least in the way of words, and Will smiles looking at it now. He misses him. And.

There's a phone on Will's nightstand. His roommate is out, probably at one of the many college parties Will has no interest in.

He makes the call.

"Hello?" Mike answers, voice heavy and tired. Will glances at the clock and winces. It's nine-thirty in San Francisco, so it must be, what, half past twelve in New York.

"Hi," he says into the phone. "I forgot the time difference. Sorry."

"It's okay," Mike says immediately, yawning in a way Will knows makes his jaw pop. When he speaks next he sounds much more awake. "What's up?"

Will shakes his head, grinning, closing his eyes to hold back the prickling behind his eyes. "Just missed you. Your voice. My roommate's out. How was your day?"

Will listens as Mike talks—or, rather, rambles—about his college classes and the newspaper internship and how he had gotten a call from Nancy earlier. Will listens as Mike talks, just breathing in the fact that he can hear his voice. Will listens as Mike talks, flips through the folder. It's Will's sketches and paintings that mean something to him and Mike—more specifically, the ones that mean

something to *him and Mike*. And it's not just Will's drawings, because there are developed photos by others—some by the two of them, sure, but most by El or Jonathan. There are polaroids from Max and Lucas and little mementos from his mother and Dustin and Nancy and Steve.

And so many of the papers in the folder are poems and stories and letters. Will finds his favorite—the ink slightly smudged by his fingers in the past, paper worn thin by the oils on his skin, folds and tears in the corners from how often he used to read it. Sometimes it strikes him that something so little could mean so much to him, but maybe that just means that it isn't so little after all.

“—Will. Will, you still there?” Mike's voice, warm and honey-like, brings him back, the hint of hesitance in his voice leaving Will scrambling to respond.

“Yeah.” His voice cracks embarrassingly, and he swallows. “That sounds nice. I just. Found that letter you wrote me. The first one.”

There's a pause. “Oh.”

“I love you, you know,” Will says, almost desperate because of the silence on the other end. “And you—well, ‘I love you more—”

“—than I've ever loved anyone,” Mike finishes, quietly, and Will can hear his smile. He almost says something, but Mike beats him to it. “It took me so long to realize that it was okay to love you, that I *wanted* to love you. I think about the things I remember about you, like your eye color. People say they're brown, but they're not. They're brown and green and a little yellow. And I remember exactly what you looked like when I first met you on those swings, and what happened the first time you came over to my house. Then there are the things that I remember but are faded, like how scared I really was all those times you were in the hospital—especially when you weren't in your own head. Like how I *felt* when I first met you. Sometimes I think about the things I've forgotten—the color of your first bike, when you first met my sister, when I fell in love with you—and maybe that wasn't even one moment, maybe it was a collection of them, but what matters is that I did. And sometimes I think about the things I don't know about you yet, not that there are many. Where

you're going to go for college. If you really like me, and what life would be like having that knowledge. Your shoe size.' Seven-point-five, by the way. I know that now."

Will can feel the sob caught in his throat, because, "You remember." The letter, the shoe size, all of it. Will often marvels over how his luck worked out to give him *Mike*, this beautiful lovely person who Will can't imagine not loving.

And Mike doesn't stop, because Mike is a perfectionist when it comes to his words and Will might even fall further in love with him for it. "I want to know all of it. I already know all of your smiles. I know all of your art. I know your bravery because I've been here for all of it. I'm a coward, and up until now I never thought I could say any of this. But you make it better. You make *me* better, Will. Like I said, I love you more than I've ever loved anyone. And all the stuff that I don't know yet—I want to. Even if I learn something new every day, even if it's sometimes scary, even if it takes me forever—I want that forever with you. Best thing I've ever done, crazy together, all of it. I promise." He coughs, and again, Will can hear that awkward smile. "Twelfth-grade me was very dramatic."

Will laughs, watery and full—and, God, that wasn't even the whole letter and he'll never understand how he didn't cry the first time he read it four years ago. Shock, probably. "You never did make promises lightly."

Mike doesn't answer for what feels like a long time. Finally: "Will?"

"Yeah?"

"Everything I said. I meant it."

Will smiles in spite of himself. "Well, I hope so, or we're going to have to reconsider this relationship."

"Really," Mike insists. "I *still* mean it. It sucks that we're so far apart. But as soon as college is over... I want forever with you. I love you more than I've ever loved anyone, differently than I could ever love anyone else. As long as we live, I want to be with you."

“That’s good,” Will says, finding his voice. “Because a forever with you doesn’t sound bad at all.”

Neither of them says anything until Mike yawns and Will smiles.

“I should go,” Mike says reluctantly. “I have class first thing in the morning.”

“No, yeah, of course,” Will agrees. “I’m supposed to talk to El tonight.”

“Tell her I say hi,” Mike says like Will wasn’t going to anyway. “I’ll write to you soon. Oh, also, tell El I’d write to *her* if she’d stop moving around so much!”

“She’s stir-crazy, Michael, and you know this,” Will grins. “But I will. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Mike says, and before he can lose the nerve, Will tells him to wait.

Mike does, of course, and Will breathes. “All that stuff you said? About wanting a forever with me, about learning more every day?” Mike doesn’t answer, but Will feels him. “I want that with you, too. More than anything.”

There goes another long silence, and then Mike says, “I miss you.”

Will blinks, hard. There have already been too many tears tonight. “I miss you, too. I love you. Goodnight.”

“Night.”

Will puts the phone back into the cradle and opens the folder. El can wait, just for a little bit.

Author's Note:

I hope you enjoyed, everyone! comments and kudos are, as always, appreciated.

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